

Original Research

Ocupación de Familia: Parent-Child Stress and Coping in Rural Farm-Dependent FamiliesAnnie J. Keeney^{1,*}, Anabel Rodriguez², Jaime Murillo¹, Savannah S. Ingold¹

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doi:10.21926/obm.icm.2501002**Received:** August 20, 2024
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Published: January 06, 2025**Abstract**

Farmworkers are the backbone of the agricultural economy in the US yet are disproportionately burdened with economic-related stress and adverse behavioral health outcomes. How these stressors translate to children and family well-being is poorly understood. Grounded in Transactional Stress and Coping Theory, we aimed to understand how children and families adapt and respond to the stressors associated with farm labor occupations in a rural, underserved, bi-national community. We utilized focus groups with adult children of farmworkers and behavioral health providers serving the farming community to understand the lived experiences of growing up with a farmworker parent. Findings suggest that farm-dependent families face chronic, interconnected stressors. Farm work is viewed as a family occupation where each member contributes directly or indirectly to the farm labor efforts. Distinct coping strategies were used among parents and children. To effectively support farm-dependent families, we recommend prioritizing K-12 policy and programming specific to farmworker families, reducing farmworker's exposure to precarious employment conditions, and employing universal harm reduction strategies to address substance use.



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Keywords

Chronic stress; Hispanic/Latino; poverty; precarious employment; qualitative inquiry

“They work long hours, and you hardly see them.”

-45-year-old male reflecting on growing up with a farmworker parent.

Agriculture production is the backbone of Imperial County, California’s economy. In 2021, an estimated \$12 million a day was generated from agriculture sales, with one in six jobs directly attributable to the sector [1]. Imperial County is geodemographically unique due to its fluidity and relationship with its border sister city, Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico. The agricultural sector relies heavily on workers from both sides of the US-Mexico border. Evidence has established that Hispanic/Latino farmworkers are susceptible to high-stress levels, depression, and alcohol abuse [2-4]. The ripple effect of these social determinants of health on child and family well-being among Imperial County farmworker populations is poorly understood. In this study, we utilize qualitative inquiry to understand and document the lived experiences of farmworkers’ children in a rural, bi-national community and the resources needed to support farmworker families effectively.

1. Background

Imperial County has the highest proportion of Hispanic/Latino residents in California (85.0%) who are five times more likely than other counties state and nationwide to work in agriculture. The 5-year median family income estimate for Imperial County is \$60,571, which is more than double the median wage for farmworkers. In 2022, the median earned salary for farmworkers was \$29,680 per year, the equivalent of \$14.27 per hour [5]. For a one-adult and one-child household, the estimated livable wage needed for Imperial County is \$32.80 per hour [6]. In Imperial County, 22% of children live in poverty, and 32% live in single-parent households, much higher than California averages of 16% and 22%, respectively [7].

Agriculture-dependent workers encounter numerous stressors due to inadequate housing, physically demanding work, poor wages, nutrition, medical care, discriminatory treatment, language barriers, and separation from friends and family [2]. As stressors accumulate, an individual's ability to cope can be overburdened. Chronic, unmanaged stressors can lead to higher levels of depression, anxiety, and substance use. Hispanic/Latino farmworkers are at higher risk of experiencing stress and behavioral health issues than the general population [8-11]. Moreover, research has found that Latino Migrant Farmworker (LMFW) children and youth were above established norms for self-report anxiety and depression, and acculturative stressors were associated with poor mental health outcomes [12, 13].

2. Purpose of the Study

Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping suggests individuals continually appraise their environment. When stressors are identified, the individual uses coping through both cognitive and behavioral responses to manage these internal and/or external stressors [14]. Internal stressors, external stressors, a body of covariates within the individual or community,

and mediating factors help a person determine if they have an adaptive or maladaptive response to a stressor. Using this framework, *our study aimed to understand how children and families adapt and respond to the inherent stressors associated with a parent's farm labor*. To our knowledge, little is known about how occupational stressors impact farmworkers' children and families.

3. Methods

Driven by a narrative qualitative approach, we conducted focus groups with behavior health providers and adult children of farmworkers. We did not seek to include youth or current farmworkers in the study because we wanted to understand the prolonged perspectives of growing up with a parent farmworker. Both groups of participants were recruited through trusted community gatekeepers (e.g., school and community health liaisons). Inclusion criteria for both groups included those 18 years or older and currently living and working in Imperial County. Behavior health providers were defined as employed professionals providing clinical services to treat individuals with mental health and/or substance use disorders. The study was approved by San Diego State University (Protocol Number: HS-2022-0016).

4. Data Collection

We conducted seven focus groups between October 2022 and December 2022 with behavioral health providers (3 focus groups total, 2-5 participants per focus group) and adult children of farmworkers (4 focus groups total, 2-3 participants per focus group). Focus groups lasted, on average, 40 minutes, ranging from 30 to 60 minutes (SD 13.6). Focus groups were conducted by group (behavior health providers or adult children of farmworkers) and administered on Zoom, a web-based video conferencing platform. Informed consent was sought before the beginning of the focus group. Focus groups were recorded, transcribed, translated (as necessary), and uploaded to NVivo 13 for analysis.

Focus groups were conducted by bicultural and bilingual (*English and Spanish*) trained research personnel using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide was developed in consultation with a behavioral health provider and community health program manager working for an agricultural worker-focused program. Questions were open-ended and focused on understanding the lived experiences, perceptions, and attitudes related to growing up in Imperial County with a farmworker parent or providing health and human services to those working in agriculture. Sample questions included "*Please describe some of the biggest concerns you have for children whose parents work in agriculture*" (for behavioral health providers) and for adult children of farmworker participants, "*What would you like people that serve children/youth (e.g., teachers) to know about being a child of a farmworker?*".

Our focus groups attempted to understand the participants' perspectives comprehensively instead of uncovering the entire breadth of the lived experiences that likely exist among our target sample [15]. As such, a small sample size was appropriate and adequate to uncover most themes and topics relevant to our research aims [16, 17]. This is supported by Guest and colleagues' [17] findings that data saturation of $\leq 5\%$ new information threshold in qualitative studies is typically reached after 6-7 interviews. For example, in 30 interviews, 70% of themes and ideas generated from the interviews were discovered in the first six interviews [16].

5. Data Analyses

We used NVivo 13 to conduct an inductive thematic analysis [18]. First, we read each focus group transcript while documenting any thoughts or possible codes. Once familiar with the data, initial codes were developed from which themes were identified and defined. Lastly, the data was reread and coded according to the significant overall themes identified. AK and SI, both identify as white females, conducted the coding and arrived at sub-themes and overarching themes by comparing the two sets of codes. Discrepancies in coding were handled through discussion. AR, who identifies as Latina with lived experience as a farmworker and child of farmworker parents as well as a field occupational epidemiologist, checked findings. Themes and sub-themes that illustrate the various elements of the overarching themes emerged from the data. The final organization of the results are presented below. Basic descriptive statistics were used to describe participant demographic characteristics.

6. Results

Utilizing Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping [14], we found families dependent on farm labor occupations faced significant and interconnected stressors, including precarious employment, parent absence, substance use, and K-12 difficulties. Agricultural-dependent families were also acutely aware that they had limited to no access to social services and supports such as healthcare, childcare/after-school care, academic support, or worker protections. The primary and secondary appraisals of the stressors and mediating factors resulted in children and parents engaging in distinct coping strategies (Figure 1). Children in our study engaged in problem-focused coping strategies, whereas parents, as reported by study participants, engaged in more emotion-focused coping strategies.

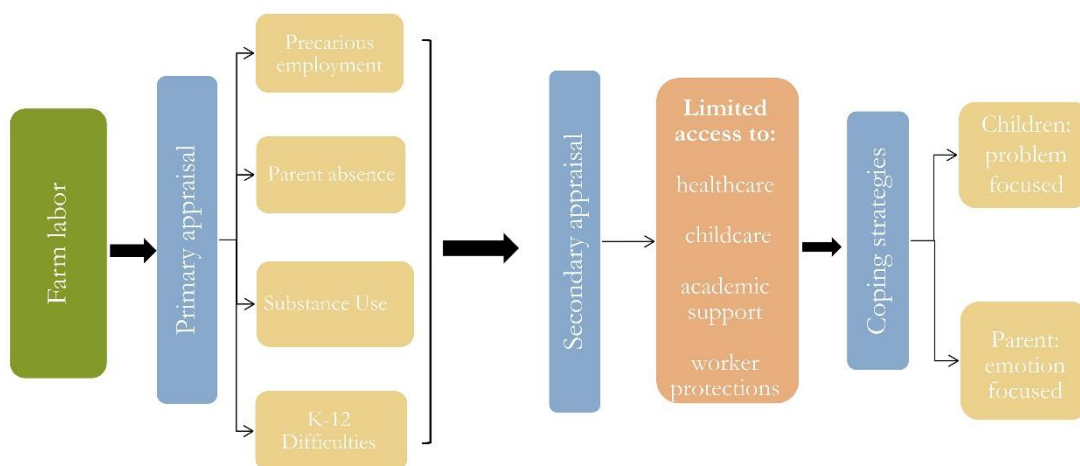


Figure 1 Transactional Model of Stress and Coping for Farm-Dependent Families.

Table 1 summarizes the major themes discussed during the seven focus groups. These themes are discussed in detail below.

Table 1 Major results from the seven focus groups based on the Transactional Model of Stress & Coping.

Chronic Family Stressors	
<i>Parent absence</i>	Long work hours; work not local Missing school or extracurricular events Lack of supervision Risk-taking behavior
<i>Substance use</i>	Used to address physical pain Alcohol and drugs easily accessible & visible at the work site Recovery efforts were compromised because of the work environment
<i>K-12 difficulties</i>	Language barriers Attendance issues Minimal parent involvement Bullying
<i>Precarious employment</i>	Poor wages Unsafe working conditions Lack of health insurance Lack of worker rights
Intergenerational Coping	
<i>Problem-focused</i>	Children help to prevent a loss of family income Children and youth self-sufficient
<i>Emotion-focused</i>	Pride Strong work ethic Future orientated

7. Focus Group Participants

Participants were divided into two groups: behavioral health providers serving the farm working community (n = 8) and adult children of farmworkers (n = 8). Most behavioral health providers identified as female and Hispanic (n = 5). All professionals worked in the field of mental health or substance use disorders, with the majority (n = 5) serving adult populations. There were slightly more substance use treatment professionals (n = 5) than mental health professionals (n = 3). The average age of professionals (M = 35.4; SD = 6.2) and was slightly younger than the average age of adult children of farmworkers (M = 38; SD = 6.6). Years of residence in Imperial County were comparable for professionals (M = 28.3; SD = 7.5) and adult children of farmworkers (M = 28; SD = 8.1). Most adult children were male (n = 5) and married (n = 6). All adult children were Hispanic, and the overwhelming majority (n = 7) identified their mother as their primary caregiver. For full participant characteristics, see Table 2.

Table 2 Participant Demographics.

	Total Participants		Adult Children of Farmworkers		Behavioral Health Providers	
	N	%	n	%	n	%
Gender						
Male	8	50.0	5	62.5	3	37.5
Female	8	50.0	3	37.5	5	62.5
Ethnicity						
Hispanic	13	81.0	8	100.0	5	62.5
Caucasian	3	18.8	0	0.0	3	37.5
Marital Status						
Married	12	75.0	6	75.0	6	75.0
Single	4	25.0	2	25.0	2	25.0
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Age (years)	36.7	6.3	38.0	6.6	35.4	6.2
Imperial County Residence	28.1	7.5	28.0	8.1	28.3	7.5

8. Chronic Family Stressors

My concern for the parents is the stress. It's such hard work waking up in the early morning, working in a 110-degree weather; how it takes a physical toll on their bodies, traveling, being away from their families. My concern is the stress that they have and not being compensated enough for what they do. (male, age 41 years, behavioral health provider).

The following sub sections include results from our focus group participants on the chronic, interconnected stressors farm-dependent families are experiencing and how they cope with these stressors.

8.1 Parent Absence

The absence of parents was a constant source of stress. Interviewees rarely saw their parent due to the long working hours. One interviewee recalled, “... you hardly see them because they work all day out there from sun-up to sundown” (female, age 38 years). This parental absence was further felt given the immigration dynamics between the US and Mexico. One interviewee shared that he would only see his father “once a month and through the fence” because he worked in the US and still lived in Mexicali (male, age 45 years).

Even after immigrating to the US as a teenager, this interviewee shared that his father would still leave for six months to work in Northern California. Interviewees described their parents as hard-working and typically worked six days a week: “They work weekends; they're not even there with the family or with you. It is hard to be a farmworker child, and even sometimes if they're not in town like local picking, they have to be in another city working”. (female, age 38 years).

The hard work and long working hours that farmworker parents put in to provide for their families often came at the expense of missing their children’s school and extracurricular activities.

It's a hard life they're living, because sometimes you would want to have your parents there with you. However, because of them working, having to provide, [having] to put food on the table, sometimes they miss functions, soccer games, school functions, and things of that nature, which you would love to have your parents there, but they can't, because that's their source of income. (male, age 45 years).

One interviewee described their childhood as a “4 out of 10”, with 10 being the perfect childhood- and attributed 90% of that having to do with a parent who was a farmworker, “I feel like everything boils down to not having your parent at home”. (female, age 42 years).

An adult child of a farmworker interviewee (male, 26 years) shared, “I know people here in the valley that they go and work far, maybe one or two hours far from here. And so, there are a lot of times that their children are just alone in their homes.” Another interviewee shared how his mother’s absence was felt in other aspects of his life: “My mom was gone all the time... she didn't have time to go up to school and check up on what I'm doing and stuff like that” (male, age 41 years). This lack of parental presence also impacted the amount of supervision the parent could provide for their child. An interviewee shared:

I lacked that supervision which kind of got me into a little bit of trouble here in there. And I just think it would have just been a lot better if I had somebody like my father, my actual father, a father figure, somebody around that could be there, because my uncles and aunts they were all gone too. (male, age 38 years).

Parents knew that farm work impacted their ability to adequately supervise their children, which impacted parenting decisions. For example, one interviewee shared how he migrated with his mom to Northern California when the season would end in Imperial:

I was always the troubled kid she wanted to keep next to her, so I would travel with her. At one point, I was working in the field because I didn't want to go to school. So my mom was like You're gonna do something; if you don't want to go to school, you're gonna work. (male, age 41 years).

The lack of parental supervision also created opportunities for youth to engage in at-risk behavior. A substance use counselor interviewee (female, age 30 years) shared:

The biggest concern is the lack of parent[s] presence. That's not a judgment statement, because I know they're there working, and for their children. But that doesn't take away from the concern [of] not being present physically, which can lead to the experimenting of substances. A lot of the times kids get high before school and their parents aren't home because they're working.

The lack of parent presence that farm-dependent families were experiencing was a significant source of stress felt by parents, children, and helping professionals alike. The nature of farm labor, requiring parents to be physically present at work but absent at home, interconnected and exacerbated other distinct family stressors.

8.2 Substance Use

Interviewees spent much time discussing how substance use (i.e., misuse) was a top stressor for farming-dependent Imperial County families. A substance use disorder counselor interviewee (male,

age 30 years) shared: *“From what I've seen, that's where they get some of their substances... while they're at work in the field.”* Substance use among farmworkers could directly impact the family unit through the loss of family income. For example, a mental health provider interviewee (male, age 41 years) shared:

I see a lot of meth and alcohol use. I've had some tell me that they use meth because it helps them when they're working. But then it gets to the point where they're using so much that they stop working.

Substance use in farm work not only results in a loss of family income but also becomes the reason for family distress and involvement in the system. A substance use disorder counselor interviewee (male, age 41 years) shared: *“A lot of the employer referrals [are] due to driving under the influence, especially [with those] that drive tractors. The employer is telling the employee - you need to get services before you come back to work.”*

For farmworkers seeking help with substance misuse, the prevalence of substance use in the agricultural community makes it more challenging for those farmworkers in recovery.

...every time [my client] would go to work, somebody would open their lunchbox, and there was cocaine there, or there was meth, or alcohol, or some kind of drug. And it was as simple as, they were eating their lunch, and she forgot her lunch one day, and they said: Oh, I'm going to share. And then she opened the lunch box and she saw something, and it was right there in her face. (female, age 43 years).

Even if the farmworkers themselves were not actively engaged in substance use, the working environment allowed for farmworkers to be exposed or harmed because of colleagues' substance misuse. One interviewee reflected on their parent's farmwork and shared *“there's people using drugs out there. I didn't really look at other things until I started getting older and understanding how dangerous it could be”* (male, age 41 years). A substance use disorder counselor interviewee (female, age 43 years) shared:

I've only worked with females who have been in the agricultural field, and it was safety. There was one female who was given drugs without her consent, she didn't know and bad things happened.

Whether through exposure to others' substance use at work in the fields, required system involvement to help with substance use treatment, or the loss of family income, substance use was a key concern among interviewees and exacerbated the chronic stress agriculture-dependent families experience in Imperial County.

8.3 K-12 Difficulties

Interviewees discussed in depth how a parent's farmwork directly impacted their children's schooling and school experience in various ways. For one mental health provider interviewee (female, age 36 years), the parent's reliance on farmwork impacted children's school attendance:

[The parents] have to follow the work, then [the children] miss a lot of school. Usually parents are coming from Mexicali; they're crossing on a daily basis. So, we see a lot of absences. They're struggling academically because of so many absences.

Many interviewees also discussed how language barriers and the parent's work schedules had the potential to impact the academic achievement of farm children. One interviewee (female, age 32 years) recalled: *"I remember, my first year [living in the United States], I was struggling a lot because I had to learn English and then try to figure out the homework and everything at the same time."* Another interviewee shared: *"There's going to be a language barrier to be able to support kids. A lot of these kids need a lot of support with homework. I didn't have that"* (male, age 43 years).

Moreover, several interviewees discussed how children of farmworkers experience bullying and discrimination in school. One interviewee (female, age 32 years) recounted: *"I remember they would bully me because I didn't know how to speak English."* Another interviewee shared, *"It's the bullying, it's that feeling the insecurity that you're less than others because you don't speak the language"* (male, age 43 years). Another interviewee (male, age 41 years), reflecting on his experience, shared how he would like to see teachers and school personnel treat children of farmworkers:

The child and the parents are trying. So, make them feel comfortable, don't single them out just because whatever: you have ugly shoes, or you have this, or your mom works in the field and the farm work. No, just treat everybody the same.

How teachers can support children of farmworkers was further illustrated by another interviewee (male, age 43 years):

I think teachers would definitely benefit from knowing about their limitations with language, time available, and other things so they can provide those resources to these kids to improve their chances for academic success.

Although interviewees shared how school-related issues were a source of stress for farm-dependent families, there was agreement among the interviewees that farm-working parents supported their children to remain in school and often encouraged them to pursue an education that would not lead to reliance on farm labor.

8.4 Precarious Employment

Interviewees discussed the consequences of precarious work and how that contributed to the chronic stress experienced among families. Farm work is poorly paid, unprotected, and insecure, and workers are at high risk for work-related fatalities and injuries. Farmworkers' health, safety, and working conditions were a top concern among interviewees. The physical nature of farm work was identified as a source of stress within the community that also had the potential to intersect with substance misuse. For example, a substance use disorder counselor interviewee (male, age 41 years) shared:

They struggle with wrist pain, hand pain, back pain, so what they cope with the best is a substance that they can get. Usually, it's alcohol to help with depression, anxiety, or meth to help with, maybe possibly, if they have something undiagnosed, because they don't have that community resource with having help or assistance with getting health insurance.

Similarly, another provider (female, age 43 years) shared that dependence on farm labor, unmanaged physical pain, and substance exposure can create a stressful and unsafe working environment:

If they still have to go back to the same environment where they were introduced to substances and going back there and still working there, or if they have physical pain, and they still have the pain, and it's not being addressed. Working with them [can be] difficult, because how are you going to address something if you're still in the same environment where you started using?

A mental health provider interviewee (female, age 36 years) described how the combination of physically demanding work conditions and lack of health insurance negatively impacted their clients' family:

...she recently had an accident, where she hurt her back at work and she is not able to work. She has to get surgery. She doesn't have insurance; her employer insurance is not covering all those medical costs that she has; she can't get her medication. Her kids are affected, because mom can't work, mom can't provide, mom can't move around because she has medical pain.

Further, the lack of worker rights and benefits often leads to the exploitation of farmworkers as they are socially vulnerable and reluctant to speak up about hazardous working conditions:

There is a group of farmworkers that are still working on becoming US citizens and are afraid to ask for the benefits that they need, because they're afraid to lose their ability to become citizens. They rather live without those benefits because they're working on becoming citizens. (male, age 45 years).

Another interviewee reflected on the stories he heard about farm work from when he was growing up, *"I was kind of just traumatized on the stories ...about farm working life: people would fight, accidents would happen, somebody got, you know, maybe ran over by the tractor, it was a bad accident..."* (male, 41 years). Given the experiences he witnessed with his mom working in the fields his entire life, this interviewee was deeply concerned about the overall health and safety of farmworkers, particularly around aging, women farmworkers.

The precarious employment experienced by farmworker parents was often shared with their children. An adult child of a farmworker interviewee (male, age 25 years) shared:

Even my dad's coworkers were always telling me- you need to go to school. They explained [what] it like in the fields, [that]they don't have any way to go up, they are always doing kind of the same thing, they stay in one place, in one position. And there is no one that can really advocate for them.

Poor wages were a significant contributor to the stress farm-dependent families experienced. An adult child of a farmworker shared, *"A lot of people can't afford to go to the doctor, and so, they neglect their health"* (female, age 32 years). Another reflected on what it was like growing up living off a farmworker's wages:

We were barely [making] ends meet. We hardly had food. We had to be careful how, when we eat, how we eat, because we don't want to eat something that was needed for dinner. Whenever it was grocery time we were like, we are so happy! (male, age 41 years).

Moreover, the poor wages and lack of health insurance created many barriers for children to receive the healthcare they needed,

We didn't have the money to go to the doctor, to the physical examination, to the dentist. [We hoped] we wouldn't have to go to the doctor... because she would have to use that time from

her work, so it was going to cost her the day of her work, plus the insurance that we didn't have. (female, age 42 years).

One interviewee (male, age 45 years) discussed not visiting the doctor until he was 18 and got ill:

I didn't see a doctor until I was 18 years old. My mom would have the home-made remedies for all the illnesses, and we had very limited resources. So, we'd have to find a way to get through illnesses and sicknesses.

There was recognition among interviewees that farmworkers are not adequately compensated, and it makes it incredibly difficult for families to make ends meet, and many are lacking being able to meet basic needs. One interviewee, speaking from lived experience, shared, *"It's difficult when the only source of income is through farm labor; that farm labor doesn't pay much. Although they [may have access] to other benefits, it doesn't provide [enough] to live"* (male, age 45 years). A mental health provider interviewee (female, age 36 years) shared, *"They are not able to have a decent living and are unable to provide for their family month to month, and they have to be working these long hours..."*

9. Intergenerational Coping

Coping strategies were employed by children and parents to cope with the chronic stressors the family experienced. Interviewees discussed how children in farm families utilized more problem-focused coping strategies, whereas farmworker parents utilized more emotional-focused coping strategies. There was a universal agreement among interviewees that farmwork was seen as a *"family occupation"* despite the parent being the only one working in the fields. This was illustrated by interviewees expressing that farmworker children often supported and protected their parents' ability to work. One interviewee reflects on how they felt growing up when they got sick:

I know it would cost a day of not working. We had to tough it up, and not say anything, because I knew that it was going to be a burden to my mom; I didn't want to add more to what she already had on her plate. Many times, I would not say anything. And other times where it was very evident, I had guilt, thinking she's going to miss work, and she's not going to make enough money for the day or for the month. (female, age 42 years).

Children often prioritize income-generating efforts over education due to their belief that farm work is a family occupation where everyone contributes to the family income. A child mental health provider interviewee (female, age 36 years) shared:

Children want to drop out of school, because they want to help... their mentality is that they need to help their parents, they need to help. And most of the time we work with single moms, or who are working in the fields. The younger kids think that they need to be the men of the household and help the mom in the home with the siblings as well.

The children coped with the family's chronic stressors caused by farmwork by maturing quickly and becoming self-sufficient. A mental health provider (male, age 41 years) shared:

A lot of the children and young teens rely on being independent. A lot of them do have to be independent because the long hours that are required upon agriculture business, sometimes 16-18 hours, especially if it's onion season, lettuce season, tomato season. The children or the

young adults, [must] be very independent, because the parents aren't around because they're working so much.

One interviewee reflected on how he was not really a “kid” growing up in a farm family:

I wasn't doing things that kids would do. And now I see my kids and I'm like: Damn, my kids are real kids, they watch cartoons. I love to see kids being kids. To me, that's a beautiful thing and I didn't see that in my life. (male, age 38 years).

On the other hand, emotional-based coping strategies were found to be utilized more by parents than children to cope with the chronic stressors experienced. Interviewees discussed how farmworker parents were often intentional in instilling a strong work ethic in their children. One interviewee shared how the pride his father took in his work impacted him:

My father would share- it doesn't matter the work that you do, but you work hard, you maintain good work ethics and be very professional at what you do. He was proud of, his work. Even though he was working in the fields, and it was really hard work. He didn't have an education, but he was very proud of what he did and he liked it. (male, age 43 years).

This strong work ethic was also observable in behavioral health provider interviewees. A substance use disorder counselor interviewee (female, age 43) shared, “The *biggest strength of the agricultural field worker is pride, pride in what they do, in how they make an honest living, and you know, the dedication that they put into it.*”

Parents coped with the chronic stress by improving conditions for the next generation. A counselor interviewee (female, age 43 years) shared,

Through that pride, the parents will work 16 hours a day to give their children that Harvard education, to give them a safer place to live, or to give them the things that they want. Just give them better than what they had, than they had.

The desire to work hard was juxtaposed with the desire from parents that their children seek a career not dependent on farm labor. An interviewee (male, age 26 years) shared:

[My dad] told me: If you don't study, you're going to be working here with me. You'd better study. He pushed me to get my career, and not only mine, all my siblings, He really pushed toward us to get our education and not work in the fields.

This hard work was distinctly felt and seen by interviewees as how parents coped with the inherent stressors associated with farm labor. One interviewee reflecting on their parents' farmwork expressed, “*They work hard so they can provide their families, for their house and other necessities. And they need us as kids. We need to understand now that we are older, we see it that they did it for us*” (female, age 38).

Further, another interviewee (female, age 38 years) reflected on how she hardly saw her parents growing up, and both she and her parents coped with that lack of presence through a focus on education:

Farmworkers, they hardly see their family... sometimes they go North or to other states to work different crops, vegetable crops, or a different area. So, that made me work hard and study harder for my future, myself and for my family, especially for my parents.

Interviewees shared that Imperial County children raised in farm families understood the dependence on agriculture work for family functioning and felt a responsibility to support their parent's efforts, often by making decisions to help ensure a loss of wages did not occur and being self-sufficient at a young age. Parents viewed their work with a sense of pride while also as a means to an end, as a way to ensure their children would be financially in a more desirable position through education and a non-farm labor career. Family-oriented decisions were found to help children and parents cope with the interconnected stressors experienced as a farm family.

10. Discussion

Our study expands our understanding of how farming occupations, particularly a caregiver's dependence on farm labor as the source of family income, impact the lived experiences of children growing up in a US-Mexico border region.

11. Interconnected, Chronic Stressors

Imperial County farm families experience chronic, interconnected stressors such as precarious employment, parent absence, substance use, and K-12 difficulties. These findings support and extend the literature. For example, it is well established that farmworkers are considered a vulnerable worker population, given the vast and multifaceted issues associated with farm labor. *Precarious work* is often considered poorly paid, unprotected, inherently hazardous, and insecure. For Hispanic/Latino, foreign-born farmworkers, these conditions are further exacerbated when considering immigration/documentation status, language barriers, discrimination, labor exploitation, and dangerous working conditions [2, 8, 19]. Furthermore, numerous studies have established that the working environment and occupational injuries increase Hispanic/Latino farmworker's risk of experiencing behavioral health problems [9-11, 20]. We found that the precarious nature of farmwork and substance use were stressors not only felt by the worker on an individual level but felt and were a concern for the whole family unit.

Notably, the long working hours, impoverished wages, lack of social services (e.g., childcare, healthcare), and dangerous working conditions contributed to interconnected stress around parent absence and K-12 difficulties. For example, the long working hours required from the farm-working parent meant there was a lack of supervision or parental presence at home, which then provided the opportunity for youth to either not be held accountable for homework completion/schoolwork or to engage in risk-taking/substance use, which then ultimately impacted academic performance. However, addressing K-12 education issues took time due to parental availability (e.g., parents' work schedule) and language barriers between parents and school personnel.

12. Distinct Coping Strategies

Our study provides insight into how farm families are coping with farm-related stress. Interestingly, we found that parents and children are utilizing two distinct types of coping. We found that parents used emotional-focused coping strategies, whereas children were more inclined to use problem-focused coping strategies. This may have to do with how the family member viewed their ability to control the perceived stressors. For example, emotional-focused coping involves regulating feelings and emotions to respond to the perceived stressor. This type of coping can be

utilized when one often feels they have little control over the stressors. Interviewees shared that parents modeled a strong work ethic and pride in their work to contribute to the family. Further, interviewees perceived parents' coping to be future-oriented and that their efforts were made to create a more financially secure future for their children. Understanding that parents were limited in their abilities to address the external stressors associated with farm labor (e.g., long work hours, unsafe working conditions), they turned their coping strategies internally and addressed their feelings associated with farm labor positively.

On the other hand, interviewees shared how children in farming families took more of a head-on approach to handling the stress caused by farm labor. Children in farming families viewed farm labor as a "family occupation" and felt a great sense of responsibility to help or not interfere or burden with their parent's work. For example, children would want to help their parents by working in the fields even if that meant dropping out of school, or some children would neglect their health so their parents would not lose a day's worth of wages. Children and youth in farm families, whether intentionally or unintentionally, adapted to their parent's work and the lack of social services and support by becoming self-sufficient in multiple aspects of their lives. However, for some interviewees who are now parents, these experiences influenced their career trajectories and how they want to parent their children. Children in farm families continually attempted to solve the challenges involved with farm labor dependence through problem-focused coping strategies that mainly focused on preventing the loss of family income.

13. Policy and Practice Implications

Based on our findings of how children and families navigate the stress of being dependent on farm labor, we make the following recommendations to support farm-dependent workers and families more effectively.

First, K-12 programming and support must be prioritized at federal, state, and local levels for farm-dependent families. On the federal level, K-12 programming specific to farmworker families must expand beyond migrant education programming. Migrant Education is a federally funded program to provide educational and support services to identified migratory children and youth. These services, as well as migrant preschool education, are implemented in Imperial County. Though these programs are critical and effective in supporting Imperial County migrant families, program criteria exclude many K-12 children and youth with farmworker parents who would benefit from additional educational and supportive services. For example, to be eligible for the migrant education program, the child must have "made a qualifying move in the preceding 36 months as a migratory agricultural worker." For many Imperial County farmworkers, agriculture work can be year-round due to the warm climate of the Valley. Thus, children and youth have lived their entire lives in Imperial County without needing parents to migrate with seasonal crops. As such, we recommend that on a federal level, eligibility be expanded to include *any* children or youth whose parents rely on full-time agriculture work.

California law mandates a system of "free schools," meaning that enrolled students or parents are not required to pay any fees for their education. This includes providing all supplies, materials, and equipment needed to participate in educational activities free of charge. Though this is an initial step in alleviating the financial burden of education, gaps exist. For example, schools can legally collect fees related to parking, uniforms (e.g., sports), graduation rental attire, musical instruments,

and field trips. Additionally, weather-appropriate clothing, backpacks, and Wi-Fi (to complete homework) are essential school-needed items that are not provided, putting further strain on financially insecure parents. Given the financial stressors that farmworkers experience, more robust K-12 financial supports are needed for farmworker children. Investments must be expanded to capture all the educational costs of K-12 public education. Reducing the financial stress experienced within K-12 education at the family level could improve academic achievement and family functioning.

On a local level, we recommend that Imperial County school districts (1) utilize positions such as School Social Workers to implement and design support groups specific to farm-dependent families and (2) provide before and after school tutoring/academic support for children and youth whose parents are farm laborers. Moreover, we encourage local schools to participate in supported, formal mentorship efforts. Community-based youth mentoring relationships have been found to be effective at promoting development and health among at-risk youth [21]. As such, for farm-dependent children who lack parental presence, non-parental adult mentorship could be particularly meaningful. Without these additional supports, Imperial County farm families will continue encountering numerous education barriers.

Second, our study found that long work hours, dangerous working conditions (i.e., lack of worker protections), lack of health insurance, and poor wages had tremendous effects on the health and well-being of workers and their families. As such, efforts to mitigate farmworker's exposure to precarious employment conditions are warranted. The physical and mental health of the entire family unit was often neglected due to inaccessible health care and financial insecurity. Disposable income to pay for necessities (e.g., food, school supplies) was scarce, and eligibility to establish social service programs was compromised due to documentation status and language barriers. We recognize that policy solutions to these conditions require close consideration of the economic and political context, the financial and human resources available, and the populations and sectors targeted. Staying within the scope of our study, we recommend expanding adult and children's health services eligibility, location, and hours of services, utilizing culturally and linguistically appropriate outreach efforts, and partnering with trusted community-based organizations to improve social protections and reduce health disparities. On an employer level, we recommend that employers subsidize English language learning for workers interested in learning English. This would directly impact worker safety and productivity at the worksite. Addressing the issues of precarious workplace conditions is context-specific; however, English language support could generally be more straightforward with the ability to reduce stress in multiple areas of farm-families lives. For example, English language support would also benefit a parent by being able to communicate with K-12 educators and navigate public health systems that may not be in dual languages.

Lastly, we recommend using universal harm-reduction strategies at work sites to address substance use issues. We found that substance use was a significant stressor experienced by parents and their children alike. Our study found that substance use was used to provide relief from physical or mental ailments experienced at the individual worker level, and sometimes, this use extended during the workday and contributed to driving under the influence of substances. This often resulted in farmworkers being referred to seek services, and employers did not allow them to return to work until successful program completion. Further, substance use was described as a visible part of the working environment, which created unsafe and stressful working conditions for non-substance use workers and impacted the recovery efforts of those struggling with use. Harm reduction strategies

incorporate community-driven public health strategies, including prevention, risk reduction, and health promotion to individuals and their families [22]. Workers may be more willing to use social and healthcare services and information at familiar transit points and work [23, 24]. As such, we recommend instituting harm reduction strategies at agricultural work transit sites and the workplace. Creating awareness of resources and supports at accessible and familiar points will allow workers to begin addressing behavioral health on their own terms. Because concern for youth engaging in substance use was also identified in our study, we recommend that these harm reduction strategies also be tailored to farm families within K-12 education supports and services.

14. Limitations

There are several limitations that readers should consider when interpreting our findings. First, our study only included the lived experiences and perspectives of 16 individuals from Imperial County, California. While our qualitative approach allowed us to understand their experiences extensively, our sample may not represent the population, and the experiences of growing up in Imperial may differ significantly from those of other parts of the US. Second, our sample involved adult children of farmworkers, which required them to reflect on what it was like growing up. Maturation or repressed memories and traumas may have impacted their perspectives of what it was like growing up with a farmworker parent, considering the amount of time between their youth and today. Third, a slight majority of our behavioral health serving professional sample were employed in service delivery focused on substance use. Lastly, the direct farmworker voice is missing. Though our results provide insights into the family's experiences coping with farm labor, the direct lived experience of a farmworker may have different perspectives from their children and community behavioral health providers.

15. Conclusion

Our study provides insight into how farm families are coping with farm-related stress. Interestingly, we found that parents and children are utilizing two distinct types of coping. We found that parents used emotional-focused coping strategies, whereas children tended to use problem-focused coping strategies. We recommend future research to involve (1) perspectives of current children and youth (18 years or younger) living in Imperial County with a farmworker parent and (2) a cross-case comparison interviewing other adult children and farm families serving professions in different regions.

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Author Contributions

Dr. Annie Keeney was responsible for project development, methodology, formal analysis, writing- original draft preparation, review, and editing; supervision, and funding acquisition. Dr. Anabel Rodriguez was responsible for formal analysis checking and original draft review and editing.

Mr. Jaime Murillo was responsible for participant recruitment and data collection. Miss Savannah Ingold was responsible for data collection and formal analysis.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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